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CONSTRUCTIVE ACTIVITIES AS AN ESSENTIAL AND IMPORTANT FACTOR IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COURSE

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“Constructive Activities in the Elementary School”—that is my topic, and any discussion of it must be prophecy rather than history, for as yet the elementary school has had no constructive activities. Ten years ago a wave of criticism to the effect that the schools were impracticable, and could not hold the children, led to a widespread determination to put in manual training. That was to be the specific for the ills diagnosed by the critics, but our specific, it is now said, has failed to work a cure. And why? For the very good reason that though the manual-training prescription was duly written out, the medicine was never actually administered to the patient. I cannot find a school in this country where shop-practice for boys and girls is found throughout the elementary school.

The name manual training appears often in courses of study, but, when analyzed into its actual constituents, it is, outside of shop-work for boys in the seventh and eighth grades, hardly more than a chaotic assemblage of various forms of “busy work,” relieved now and then by a bit of knife-work for boys, sewing for girls, or, for the younger children, a dip into the realm of the aesthetic in what Mr. Veblein calls “clay-muddling.” Few subjects have been so handicapped as manual training; at the outset there was little in the way of equipment, no kilns, no looms, no benches. There was no time, the subject being superinduced on an already overcrowded curriculum. There was no pedagogical experience. There was no real understanding of the place of handwork in the educational state, and, at the best, manual training has never been more than an unnaturalized foreigner *in* the body politic, not *of* it.

Can handwork be made an effective part of the elementary school? Yes, but there must be a new point of view. We must be ready to put into practice what the best psychological theory has given us. There must be an entire reorganization of subject matter. The handwork must not be a new subject elbowing out space for itself and squeezing up the other subjects. No subject must be allowed to stand isolated. We must break down the pigeon-holes into which kinds of knowledge have been separately bunched. The three R's, though hoary with respectability, are not the pivots on which the educational system turns. No child has an intellectual appreciation of the value of reading, writing, and arithmetic as such. They become of importance to him only when they are the means through which he attains some desired end. Take a child in the first grade. Give him the simplest forms of constructive activity, let him build a playhouse, make jelly or dry apples, dye wool and weave tiny rings. The wooden house, instead of being "so big" by hand is a definite number of inches on the ruler. The materials that enter into the making of jelly are weighed and combined in definite proportion. The weaving of rings demands careful laying out of spaces before the design can be put in. Thus through the actual making of things, number work, in terms of measurements and weights is levied upon each activity. The record of the work in the child's own notebook turns into reading and writing. In a perfectly natural, simple fashion the child reaches out through his social occupations to the more formal studies, which, under such circumstances, cease to be formal or even formidable.

As the "three R's" become the tools which express and reinforce the activities, on the one hand, so, on the other, history, geography, and nature-study, a group in which each is the complement of the others, should form the industrial and social background from which the activities themselves spring. It is illogical and arbitrary to tear apart subjects which rightly belong together in order to build a series of separate coops in which to house a curriculum.

Constructive activities demand a constructive method, and a constructive method insists that the order of introducing handi-

crafts should be from the kindergarten up, rather than from the eighth grade down. A right constructive method also implies that the handicrafts should not follow along a line of prescribed models arranged from the point of view of the tool and of the adult organizing mind, but should be based absolutely on the subject-matter taught and should be vitally related to each other.

One of the effects of such reorganization is a saving of time. With such fusion of studies as I have briefly indicated, all the formal subjects usually taught in the grade, plus actual shop work in *all* the handicrafts, can be adequately taught without the expenditure of an extra half hour of time. The cost of such reorganization would be chiefly the initial expense in the way of additional space and equipment, and the permanent expense of perhaps two additional teachers in a school of average size. And finally, to make such reorganization effective, there must be mental organization on the part of both grade teacher and special teacher, and the special teacher should add to a broad pedagogical outlook a sound technical training.

What would be the effect of such school work on children? The most startling fact concerning the elementary school is the fact that of those who enter the first grade 80 per cent. do not reach the eighth, an educational leak which, if paralleled in business, would mean bankruptcy. It is my belief that no possible agency could so effectively hold a child in school as a right readjustment of the elementary course on the basis of handicrafts, and I say put the handwork in from the kindergarten up, because the children fall out chiefly in Grades 3, 2, and 4, and in that order. Consider for a moment the agencies which the modern feeling of responsibility for the child brings into co-operative guardianship around the third-grade boy who wishes to play truant. A recent report lists them for us: The truant officer, the factory inspector, the probation officer, the charity worker, the sociologist, the social settlement worker, the woman's club, the teacher, the principal, and the humanitarian—all these to make one boy stay in the third grade. And yet he slips through the meshes of the educational system and escapes to his true school, the street. This small boy has more ingenuity and more energy

than the school in its present organization can use, an ingenuity and energy certain to be destructive unless we can make them constructive.

If the money spent, and now necessarily spent, on restraint, constraint, reformation, were turned over into the school funds and expended on prevention, children and communities would be immeasurably the better therefor. That constructive activities would hold the child is clearly apparent from our truant schools, where the most difficult children are so held, and the report of their desirable activities comes with pathetic emphasis to the good little boy who has no such opportunities. We can quite understand the inoffensive little chap who in Chicago was found deliberately throwing stones at windows that he might be sent to Bowmanville (the parental school) "where they make things."

Now if we do succeed in holding the children through the eight grades our educational problem is practically solved. It is because we have not been able to do this that the manufacturers have come forward with their remedy, which is to push the trade ideal down into the grades. Appalled at the lost 80 per cent., at the mass of raw material not converted by the school into marketable stuff, dismayed by their own inability to get skilled workmen, they say, give us the child at the earliest possible moment, at the place where you no longer hold him; let him select a trade, and we will at least make a tolerable artisan of him. There can hardly be a movement more significant and more important than to have the proverbial apathy of communities toward educational questions broken in upon by the alert interest of business men. They are progressive, practical, accustomed to see a weakness and remedy it without any beating around the bush. They command money and influence. What they ordain is almost certain to come to pass. I heartily agree with their plan of establishing trade schools. They are an imperative need. But I am strongly of the opinion that the trade school should not begin its especial work till the close of the elementary school. In other words, I do not believe in the two sorts of elementary school, one bent to fasten on to a trade school, the other bent to fasten on to a "culture" school. Handwork in the elementary school

should be the same whether the child is destined for the carpenter's bench, the professor's chair, or any of the vast range of occupations between these. Differentiation can seldom come wisely into play in the elementary school. Vocational selection, if imposed upon the child while still in the grades, is likely to be a disastrous mistake. No teacher, no parent even, holds the divining-rod whereby may be discovered the secret springs of a child's best future activity. Even voluntary early vocational selection is not to be trusted. It is liable to be whimsical, uncertain, determined by temporary influences. If the kind of occupation fervently made by every boy of ten were to reach mature realization, the army and the navy, the police force, the livery business, would be steadily overcrowded. It is hardly reasonable to expect a child of ten or twelve to select out of the great industrial forces of the world that particular line in which his contribution to those forces should run, nor should it be the purpose of the elementary school to urge such selection.

Courses in the elementary school should be planned with the idea of giving to each child the utmost in the way of general development possible to him. It is on this basis alone that constructive activities should be put into the first eight grades. I think of the child as at the hub of a wheel. All his studies and activities are the spokes that connect him with the rim, or the world in general. And he must be led to look along each spoke to each section of the rim. Each handicraft, each subject, should be considered as a means in throwing what Browning calls "films of connection" between the child and his environment. If you set him too early in an appointed groove you unduly narrow his experience. You compel him to look along one spoke to one section of the rim, instead of to all. You strengthen one film of connection at the expense of the others. Every child, whether he is to be later in trade or in scholastic life, has a right to the widest opening out of his personal resources, the most varied activities, the most freely experimental stretching-out of tentacles, that the best-planned, best-equipped elementary school can offer. By all means give every child a chance at a trade, but first give him the opportunity of being a developed individual.

Reorganization such as I believe in, a reorganization called for by two expert opinions, that of the business man and that of the small boy who plays truant at the third grade, would, I am confident, serve even the manufacturer's need better than his own method which, indeed, he does not propose as ideal but as a practical meeting of a present situation. Business statistics are as relentless as those of the schools and show that boys who go directly into some trade at fourteen to sixteen usually come to the limit of their advancement by eighteen, while those who can get more training are the ones who go on to higher positions.

To sum up: I believe in handwork in the elementary school, from the kindergarten up. I believe not in one or two activities, but in all the activities taught in real shops, in a workmanlike manner, from the standpoint of industrial history, to both girls and boys. I believe that the result of such training will be a product of greatly increased value to trade, to the college world, and to life in general, and I believe that this ideal can be widely accomplished only when the business man and the pedagogue make it their common problem.